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ABSTRACT

Although most people agree that not enough entry workers possess the skills required for success in the workplace, few individuals are able to articulate clearly why and where the skills gap occurs. Despite the popularity of blaming schools and curricula, little hard evidence exists to support the claim that U.S. secondary school performance is declining relative to its standing in recent decades. Research studies focusing on enterprises, schools, and workers have established the following: (1) employees consistently identify deficits in employees' behavioral skills as the primary cause of poor job performance; (2) efforts to bolster students' academic skills through high school reform are worthwhile, but it must be remembered that education must impart more than basic skills; and (3) the workplace rewards workers who possess work-related behavioral skills and attitudes. Educational legislation and policy must address these concerns through the following actions: (1) encourage the fostering of behavioral skills through legislation focusing on the connection between school and work; (2) use work-based learning programs and appropriate classroom techniques to foster development of attitudes and behaviors that translate well in work environments; and (3) investigate which work-related attitudes and behaviors are most important for success in the workplace. (MN)

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Challenge: To acknowledge the role of work-related behavioral skills and attitudes as both a cause of and remedy for the skills gap.

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	What does the research tell us?	How can policy address it?
Enterprises	Employers consistently identify deficits in the behavioral skills of their employees as the primary cause of poor job performance.	Take heed of employers' complaints by including the fostering of behavioral skills in legislation that focuses on the connection between school and work.
Schools	Efforts to bolster students' academic skills through school reform are worthwhile, but education imparts more than reading, writing, and arithmetic.	Foster the development of attitudes and behaviors that translate well in a work environment through the use of pedagogy in school classrooms and work-based learning programs.
Workers	The workplace rewards workers who possess work-related behavioral skills and attitudes.	Investigate, through study that tracks workers over time, which work-related attitudes and behaviors are most important for success in the workplace.

CE068 133

Rethinking the Skills Gap: Is It Craft or Character?

Although most Americans agree that the nation faces a skills gap—a problem with the preparedness and proficiency of its workforce—few are able to articulate clearly why and where that gap occurs. The popular notion blames schools and their curricula by claiming that deficits in academic skills account for the widely reported shortfall in job performance. But is the popular notion accurate? Not entirely.

There is little hard evidence to prove that U.S. secondary school performance is declining relative to its standing in recent decades; instead, the general trend over the last ten years has been toward improvement, as students' test scores have rebounded from lower levels in the 1970s. Clearly, many individual schools are in jeopardy, and American students rank average on an international scale; yet there has been no nationwide collapse in academic skills—certainly not of the magnitude necessary to explain the current perception of deficits in the nation's workforce.

To locate the source of this skills gap in the American landscape, it is necessary to consult a map drawn by employers. When asked to identify the primary causes of job performance problems, employers single out the behavioral skills and work attitudes of their employees—their "soft" skills. Although employers have consistently voiced this complaint, it has not reached the ears of policy makers, who thus far have focused on the development of employees' "hard" skills—their academic and occupation-specific abilities.

The recently passed Goals 2000: Educate America Act may yet prove to be an example of this tendency. By establishing national occupational skills and educational standards, this policy measure is an important first step toward forging closer relationships between education and work life. But its real challenge is to ensure that behavioral skills are not overlooked. Along with improving the nation's academic and technical skills, this initiative should accord behavioral skills the same weight already given to them by employers.

The Skills Gap Debate

There is nothing novel in the argument that an absence of behavioral skills has caused a gap in workplace performance. In the early 1970s, productivity and quality problems were traced to a decline in morale, a lack of conscientiousness, and a dearth of citizenship values. Rising expectations of new entrants to the labor force—the over-educated and over-qualified, who worked in jobs that made little use of their academic skills—bred a multitude of conflicts in the workplace.

Beginning in the mid-1980s, new rhetoric about the relationship between workforce quality and international competitiveness emerged. In 1983, *A Nation at Risk* warned about deteriorating performance in secondary schools. In 1988, *Workforce 2000* predicted that the distribution of jobs would shift toward positions requiring higher levels of academic ability. Anecdotes about incredibly low levels of literacy among entry-level job applicants in urban areas seemed to prove that the supply of academic skills was eroding, while demand in the form of rising job requirements was increasing. The heralded belief was that this erosion formed an expanding chasm in the workforce: an academic skills gap.

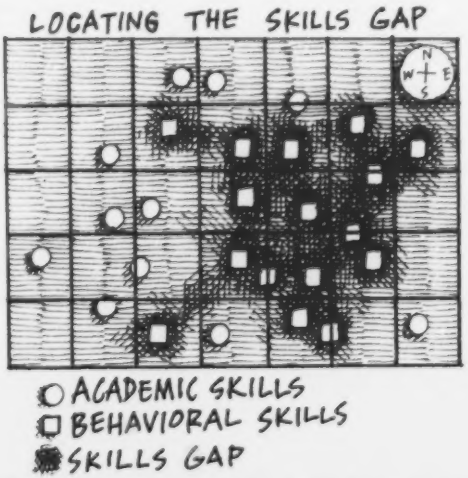
The more telling evidence of deficits in the performance of high school graduates comes from directly asking employers to relate their impressions of and ex-

periences with applicants and newly hired workers. What characteristics do employers believe entry-level candidates need in order to be successful? What qualities do they lack? Recent surveys make the case for character.

- A 1983 survey by Research and Forecasts found that "character" was the attribute given primary importance in hiring decisions; "education" ranked first for only 5 percent of executives.

- The Committee for Economic Development's 1984 survey of small employers found that "a sense of responsibility, self-discipline, pride, teamwork, and enthusiasm" was their top priority in choosing applicants.

- A 1989 employer survey by Towers Perrin found the most common reason for rejecting applicants was the belief that they lacked the work attitudes and behaviors needed to adapt successfully to the work environment. The most common reasons for firing new hires were absenteeism and the failure to adapt; only 9 percent were dismissed due to the inability to learn how to perform their jobs.



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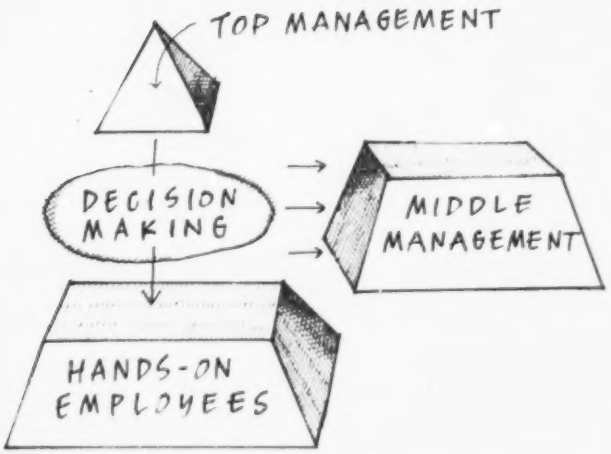
- The Committee for Economic Development's 1991 survey, conducted by Louis Harris, found that dedication to work and discipline in work habits were the biggest deficits employers perceived in high school graduate applicants.

Although the broad terms of "attitudes" and "behavior" account for much of employers' dissatisfaction with new hires, what exactly constitutes "good" character for the workplace? Although it is unreasonable to judge individual personalities wholesale, there are ways of categorizing behavioral skills that help to identify what makes productive workers and, hence, competitive firms.

Taking Stock of Work-Relevant Attitudes

Not surprisingly, employers are rather adept at itemizing the attitudes and behaviors relevant to the workplace. They most often cite as essential criteria basic work attitudes such as showing up on time, following instructions, and taking pride in a job's outcome. Personnel psychologists have identified and culled thousands of these characteristics and related them to the attributes of employees in order to reveal the attitudes that are essential to success in the workplace.

Personality, one of the broadest classifications, should not be confused with its meaning in the vernacular. It refers to relevant aspects of a person's disposition—an underlying tendency to react in particular ways—that affect performance in the work environment. Under this rubric, conscientiousness, or dependability, ranks first; above all other characteristics, it is most directly related to positive job performance for all occupational groups—from success in training and job proficiency to productivity and promotion. EQW research finds that workers' levels of optimism or the extent to which they believe they have control over outcomes in their lives closely associates with success in the labor market. In other words, the labor market rewards indi-



High-performance work systems "flatten" the pyramid of traditional organization by cutting out layers of management.

viduals who are self-reliant or "empowered." Critics do worry that under this rhetoric lurks what employers really want: a submissive employee, one who simply follows orders well. On the contrary, studies suggest that compliance is not a good predictor of job performance.

Motivation, the driving force behind the need to achieve, determines an individual's level of success. Initiative, self-determination, and persistence are all traits closely associated with motivation, which serves as an important substitute for supervision and monitoring. On the job, motivation can be increased in several ways: by raising supervisors' expectations of their employees; by having employees voluntarily agree to set clear, challenging goals by which to gauge their performance; and, finally, by giving employees the anticipation of a valued reward. The ability to motivate oneself through goal setting and other techniques is a skill that has proven to be highly effective and relatively easy to teach.

Prosocial behavior characterizes employees who go beyond assigned roles, often sacrificing their own interests for the good of the organization. The notion of citizenship, which is one aspect of this behavior, describes situations in which employees do not expect a reward or even the awareness of their actions. In a sense, it gauges what employees do when no one is looking. Commitment to an organization is a related concept that captures an individual's interest in remaining with the organization, accepting its goals, and working on its behalf. For the employer, reduced turnover and high levels of effort are some of the benefits of such a commitment. Prosocial behavior can be fostered by management practices that treat workers fairly; it also results from early childhood experiences. Whether imparted during childhood or adulthood, however, classroom intervention has been shown to increase cooperation, "helping" behaviors, and student discipline.

Although classifying these attributes is a helpful exercise, simply comparing a candidate's qualities to a laundry list of broadly defined behavioral skills provides no solution to the skills gap. Different jobs require different types of behavior, and, in a changing economic landscape, it is important to identify the specific behavioral skills that tomorrow's workforce will need.

The Demands of High-Performance Work

Deficits in workforce preparation seem to be related to a change in what jobs now demand of workers. The change has been brought on by two phenomena that together have permanently altered the fabric of the American firm: the restructuring of organizations to remain competitive in a harsh economy and the advent of high-performance work systems to help meet that challenge. By affecting how firms organize work and what jobs in this new economy require of workers, both events have resulted in an increased demand for behavioral skills.

High-performance work systems "flatten" the pyramid of traditional organization by cutting out layers of

management and transferring a great deal of decision making from managers at the tops of hierarchies to hands-on employees involved in groups and teams. Instead of rote chores, employees participate in team projects, have a greater stake in the development of an end-product, and perform enriched tasks—all of which are associated with higher levels of individual and organizational performance.

Unlike the prevailing notions about high-performance work, employees are not expected to master a greater *number* of skills—which would imply a greater need for academic or occupation-specific skills. Instead, the new work systems stress *different* skills that are behavioral in nature. EQW has found that work attitudes, not amassing a substantial cache of academic or occupational skills, play a crucial role in the success of these new systems. Both restructured organizations that reduce supervision levels and high-performance work systems that increase employee autonomy create environments in which employees are much more on their own. As a result, they must perform "enriched" individual tasks that demand a higher level of behavioral skills: taking initiative, trouble-shooting, and collaborating with others to solve problems or develop ideas.

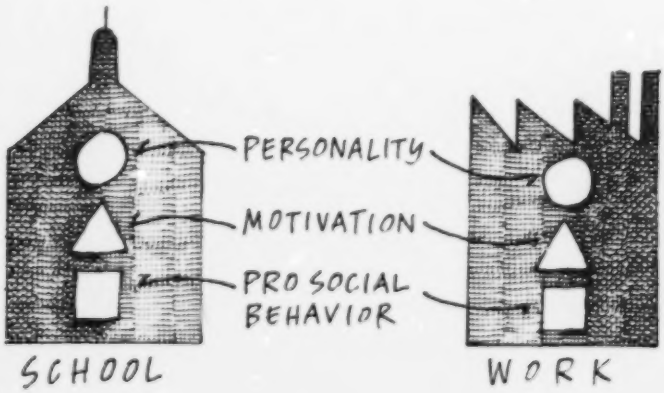
Behavioral skills will only grow in importance as firms continue to downsize. A skills gap already exists, and increasing the demand for behavioral skills without sufficient supply will only exacerbate the imbalance. To realign the scales, it is necessary to find a way to "pump up" the supply of behavioral skills in the economy.

Soft Skills in Schools: More Than the Three Rs

Efforts to bolster students' academic skills through school reform are certainly worthwhile—but reading, writing, and arithmetic are not the only tools that schools impart. Often overlooked are the "life" lessons taught by educational institutions: reinforcing behaviors, cultivating attitudes (negative or positive), and developing the ability to deal with different peoples, personalities, and cultures. Given the range of experience they provide, schools may be an ideal place to help close the skills gap.

When considering whether schools should teach "values," a host of problems emerge, ranging from philosophical objections about government-induced paternalism to practical concerns about which set of values should be fostered. On the other hand, teaching values in the classroom has had a long history in the United States. Although at the moment teaching values in public schools seems focused, particularly in inner cities, on attempts to halt destructive behavior outside of school, there is a clear overlap between these values and many of the work attitudes preferred by employers.

Three rationales argue in favor of developing values in schools that approximate work-related behavioral skills. First, characteristics



School experiences can engender positive behaviors that translate well in a work environment.

such as conscientiousness and prosocial behavior would seem to benefit individuals and society broadly, accomplishing much more than just supplying employers with perfect employees. Second—and more important—students inevitably pick up values and attitudes from their experiences in school, whether or not this is intended. Engagement with the education system, with teachers, and with peers implicitly shapes the attitudes of students, even if there are not explicit efforts to teach values in the classroom. Finally, evidence suggests that deficits in work-related attitudes are very difficult to correct later in life. Programs to help the "hard-core" unemployed to develop better behavioral skills found that their attitudes toward work were shaped at a young age and proved to be extremely resistant to change. Through early intervention, education may help to lessen the severity of such attitudinal problems.

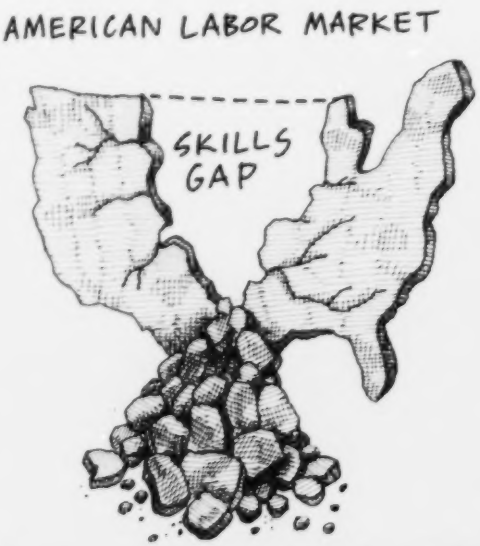
Public schools cannot behave like private institutions, where religion and culture reinforce norms and values. But they can bestow attitudes and behaviors that prepare students well for the workforce just by doing what they have been all along: teaching. Many of the interpersonal skills specific to the rigors of high-performance work can be conferred in the classroom through the clever use of pedagogy that fosters student participation, communication, and creativity. In general, school experiences can engender positive behaviors that translate well in a work environment. Both group assignments and working in teams to discuss ideas teach the crucial interpersonal and problem-solving skills that are in demand in this new economy.

Responsibility, however, cannot rest solely on the schools, whose primary task is to educate, not to socialize, students. Schools cannot be expected to become surrogate parents, to instill by themselves values that many believe should be taught in the living room instead of the classroom. Ideally, schools should only supplement the development of attitudes and behaviors that are learned in families and through community groups.

Employers also have a role to play. Work-based learning schemes—internships, cooperative education, and school-to-work programs that bring impressionable students into the workplace—provide important opportunities to teach lessons about behavior and attitudes. The peer evaluation inherent in teamwork also shapes the attitudes and behaviors of new hires. It is vitally important that these experiences convey appropriate values—that experienced workers offer good examples for new employees.

Public Policy: Closing the Gap

The voice of the employer has gained some attention from policy makers; a few efforts already recognize that the development of attitudes is a crucial component of workplace skills. The Jobs Training Partnership Act considers "work maturity"—punctuality, the ability to



If the skills gap continues to grow and erode the workforce's base, America faces the danger of a labor-market landslide.

follow and carry out instructions—as one of the three outcomes of its training programs. In 1987, the National Alliance of Business identified attitudes such as responsiveness and reliability as important characteristics of workplace readiness. Most recently, in 1991, the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills identified a set of personal qualities—responsibility and sociability—as part of the basic "Foundation Skills" required for a quality workforce.

Despite these examples, behavioral skills have received virtually no attention in the policy arena. Although national reports mention work attitudes, they never explore how such attitudes might be developed. In many cases, work attitudes are tacked onto the ends of "wish lists" of skills that workers should have. Lack of clarity and incomplete information make it difficult to know whether proposals for the development of work attitudes are reasonable.

Should public policy be responsible, even in part, for developing behavioral skills? If attitudes are shaped by experience, but once formed persist over time, then efforts to produce positive work attitudes should be part of the public policy agenda. Schools are one logical place to acquire positive workplace attitudes, and virtually any program directed at youth before they enter the workforce full-time might be beneficial. Before implementing any strategies to teach behavioral skills, however, public policy needs to do a bit of investigative work:

- **Continue to consult employers and unions.** Ultimately, the workplace determines which skills are required of employees. Of the few existing surveys that directly ask what deficiencies employers perceive in the workforce, all find that work attitudes are indeed employers' greatest concern.

- **Establish longitudinal data that help test the contribution of work attitudes over time.** The paucity of such data has held back our understanding of which attitudes are most important for success in the workplace. Such information would also help us to understand how attitudes are shaped and which ones are most easily changed.

- **Consider "soft" as well as "hard" skills in the development of occupational and educational standards.** As Goals 2000 establishes academic and occupational skills standards—a much needed and valuable effort—include a discussion of the behavioral skills that are needed on the job. This effort is particularly important when creating new curricula and credentials, because the development of these skills can be integrated into chosen methods of teaching.

- **Teach behavioral skills early.** Whether through community, school, or social programs, reach students at a young age in order to increase their chances for success both in school and in the work world.

With effort, it is possible to begin closing the skills gap. As employers relate their experiences with applicants and new hires, policy makers should acknowledge the ways in which behavioral skills affect employee performance, the overall productivity of an organization, and, ultimately, the competitiveness of the nation's industries. Although some aspects of personality are not easily changed, work-related behavioral skills can certainly be fostered. If the skills gap continues to grow and erode the workforce's base—if demand continues to rise and if nothing is done to ensure the supply of these skills—America faces the danger of a labor-market landslide. Research, on the other hand, has proven that the catastrophe may be prevented by linking the development of behavioral skills to the effort of academic reform, by listening to the employer, and by enriching the nation's knowledge of these types of skills.

—Peter Cappelli and Maria Iannozzi

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EQW is a partnership between one of this nation's premier business schools and one of its leading graduate schools of education. Established by the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School and Graduate School of Education under a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Education, EQW's program of research and policy analysis takes as its principal challenge the renewal of American competitiveness through leveraged investments in the quality of the nation's workforce.

The EQW research agenda focuses on four broad questions:

1. What do employers need to know to better use the skills their workers bring with them and acquire in the workplace?
2. How can schools and other providers become more effective suppliers of skilled and disciplined workers?
3. How can workers develop more complete skills portfolios that combine the competencies and disciplines a productive economy requires?
4. What is the best role for public policy in the development of a work-related education and training market that efficiently links consuming firms, supplying schools, and educated workers?

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Barton, Paul E. 1990. *Skills Employers Need. Time to Measure Them?* Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.

Cappelli, Peter. 1992. "Is the Skills Gap Really about Attitudes?" Philadelphia, PA: National Center on the Educational Quality of the Workforce.

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